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Rhetorical and Scientific Aspects of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abstract
There are fields of research on *NE* which still need attention: the edition of the text the style and rhetorical and logical instruments employed by Aristotle in setting out his position. After indicating the situation of the research on the text of *NE*, I describe some rhetorical devices used by Aristotle in his work: the presence of a preamble, clues about how the argument will be developed, a tendency to introduce new arguments in an inconspicuous way and the articulation of general definitions through more specific analyses. At a deeper level *NE* seems to be organised on the model of investigating definitions described in the second Book of the *Posterior Analytics*, and not according the so-called 'dialectical method'. In conclusion I argue that *NE* is not an early or a confused work, as some scholars maintain, but rather a skilful construction, the fruit of a mature intelligence.

Keywords
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, rhetoric, method, definition, *Posterior Analytics*

I

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the most heavily discussed works in Greek antiquity. There is a small industry made up by those publishing articles and books on this subject, similar to the one involved in publishing books on Wittgenstein in the English-speaking countries or Heidegger in Continental Europe.

The text and style of this Aristotelian work, however, have never been exhaustively studied. Indeed, there is still a lot of preparatory work to do to facilitate its interpretation. I shall outline some of the most important fields of research which still need attention: the edition of the text of the

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NE, the style and rhetorical and logical instruments employed by Aristotle in setting out his position.

The text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has no complete modern critical edition. Already in the Fifties the French speaking commentator, R.A. Gauthier, complained about this lack of a scientific edition in the modern sense of the term.[1] Nobody has clarified the relationship between the different manuscripts or drawn a *stemma codicum*. The only edition that is reprinted today, and is available in the bookshops, is the Oxford edition by Bywater, dating back to the end of the Nineteenth century.[2] It is based almost exclusively on two manuscripts, the most ancient ones (Kb = Laurentianus LXXXI, 11, 10th cent., and Lb = Parisiensis 1854, 12th cent.), on Grosseteste's Latin translation (first half of the 13th cent.) and on Aspasius' Commentary (second century AD).[3] Bywater rarely cites the more recent manuscripts, on which his predecessors, Bekker and Susemihl, baseed their editions.[4] A more recent edition of the text, a revision of Susemihl's edition made at the beginning of the 20th century by O. Apelt,[5] is currently out of

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1) R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif (trans.), *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, introduction, translation and commentary (Louvain/Paris 1958-1959), second edition with a new introduction (Louvain/Paris 1970), I, pp. 301-314.

2) I. Bywater (ed.), *Oxford Classical Texts* (Oxford 1894). See also his *Contributions to the Textual Criticism of Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics"* (Oxford 1892). He says that he wants to modify Bekker's text of the *NE* in order to return as much as possible to the readings of ms. Kb. On his edition see the review by F. Susemihl, *Berliner philologische Wochenschrift* 12 (1892), columns 74-78; he objects to Bywater's overvalutation of ms. Kb.

3) Aspasius' Commentary is incomplete: we have only the sections on Books I-IV and VII,7-VIII 1-15. It has been edited by G. Heylbut (ed.), *Aspasii in Ethica Nicomachea quae supersunt commentaria. CAG* XIX/1 (Berlin 1889). It is the most ancient testimony of the text of the *NE*, but it is difficult to distinguish between genuine quotations of Aristotle's words and Aspasius' paraphrase and comments.

4) I. Bekker (ed.), *Academia Regia Borussica*, (Berlin 1830), based on 6 mss: Kb, Lb, Mb = Marcianus gr. 213 (middle of 15th cent.); Nb = Marcianus app. IV, 53 (14th cent.); Ob = Riccardianus 46 (14th cent.); Ha = Marcianus 214 (14th cent.). In his *Aristotelis ethica Nicomachea, editio minor* (Oxford 1837), Bekker lists nineteen important manuscripts of the *NE*, but uses only the six indicated here. F. Susemihl (ed.), *Bibliotheca Teubneriana* (Leipzig 1872), is based for the most part on 4 mss. (Kb, Lb, Mb, Ob), the Aldine edition and Grosseteste (cf. pp. V-IX), but lists eleven other important manuscripts.

5) *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*, Leipzig 2nd ed. 1903, 3rd ed. 1912, with slight modifications. Apelt says that we should not give much weight to Aspasius' testimony (cf. p. V), but in fact he uses Aspasius quite often. On this edition see the review by W. Jaeger, *Berliner philologische*

print. Apelt's edition was an attempt to incorporate into Susemihl the best results of Bywater's work, as Susemihl himself said he would have done had he revised his edition.[6] Apelt's work is, in these respects, the most recent edition of the text and should not be overlooked.[7] However, a new edition of the text is much needed.

The situation has been somewhat improved by the work of D. Harlfinger on the text of the *Eudemian Ethics*, the other Aristotelian treatise on ethics.[8] Harlfinger has done for the *EE* the work needed for the *NE*, a thorough examination of the manuscripts of this Aristotelian text. Harlfinger's work is useful for the *NE* as well, as the two treatises share the central books: Books V-VII of the *NE* are identical in the manuscripts to Books IV-VI of the *EE*. On the basis of the work done by Harlfinger and others, a new edition of the *Eudemian Ethics* was published in the Nineties, but it is not in all respects reliable.[9] While I do not wish to suggest that a new edition of the *NE* would change the text we know dramatically, it remains possible that many difficult points might be resolved differently on the basis of a more reliable text.

Not only does the text of the work lack a definitive critical edition: the style itself has not yet been adequately studied. The studies of the relationship between the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* offer some guidance on the style of the *NE.* Those studies are mainly interested in establishing whether the *EE* is earlier or later than the *NE*. Some of them, the most ancient ones, are interested also in establishing whether or not the *EE* is an authentic Aristotelian work, but this problem is nowadays

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Wochenschrift 35 (1915), columns 34-38: he says that it is "das zuverlässigste Hilfsmittel das wir heute für dieses text des Philosophen haben".

6) Rev. of Bywater, column 74.

7) It has been reprinted recently in front of my Italian translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with some textual modifications: C. Natali (ed.), *Aristotele. Etica Nicomachea*, Italian translation, introduction and notes (Rome/Bari 1999).

8) D. Harlfinger, "Die Überlieferungsgeschichte der *Eudemischen Ethik*", in P. Moraux and D. Harlfinger (eds.), *Untersuchungen zur* Eudemischen Ethik, Akten des 5. Symposium Aristotelicum (Berlin 1971), pp. 1-50. D. Hutchinson is now working on this material, see his article "The Eudemian manuscripts of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics" (forthcoming).

9) R.R. Walzer and J.M. Mingay (eds.), *Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia*, Oxford Classical Texts (Oxford 1991); on the shortcomings of this edition see J. Barnes's review, in *Classical Review* 42 (1992), pp. 27-31, and the Introduction by P.L. Donini to his Italian translation of the text: P.L. Donini (ed.), *Aristotele. Etica Eudemia*, Italian translation, introduction and notes (Rome/Bari 1999). He says that Walzer's edition is "largamente inaffidabile".

considered as solved. In addition to older German works, there are two useful recent books in English on this issue.[10] There are also some general studies on Aristotle's style which can be read with profit: some of them date from the late nineteenth century, but there is a recent article by R. Netz.[11] Netz has studied the structure of Aristotelian paragraphs, and pointed out the peculiar technique involved in Aristotle's argumentation. Instead of positing a series of premises from which the conclusion follows, as one would expect, Aristotle in his treatises tends to place the main conclusion of the argument at the beginning of the paragraph, and then to add the reason in support of it. The argument may have a simple structure, such as this:

p because of *q*.

Or it can have a more complex structure, such as this:

p because of *q*, because of *z*, because of *w*, etc.[12]

As Netz has remarked, the reason for this procedure is mainly rhetorical, it aims to focus the public's attention on the main conclusion. It was already well known in antiquity that the public remember the sentence better at the beginning or at the end of a passage, while what comes between has less impact on the audience.[13] But the rhetoric in the *NE* is not found only at the level of the paragraph; the structure of the books and their sequence represent the result of conscious reflection and careful planning. I shall now discuss some of the main aspects of the organisation of the *NE* at this level.

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10) H. Rassow, *Beiträge zur Erklärung und Texteskritik der Nikomachischen Ethik des Aristoteles* (Weimar 1862); Id., *Forschungen über die Nikomachische Ethik des Aristoteles* (Weimar 1874); E. Kapp, *Das Verhältnis der Eudemischen zur Nikomachischen Ethik* (Berlin 1912); R. Walzer, *Magna Moralia und aristotelische Ethik* (Berlin 1929); Ch. Rowe, *The Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics: a Study in the Development of Aristotle's Thought* (Cambridge 1971); A. Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford 1978).

11) R. Eucken, *De Aristotelis dicendi ratione*, I: *Observationes de particularum usu*, (Göttingen 1866); Id. *Über die Sprachgebrauch des Aristoteles: Beobachtungen über die Präpositionen* (Berlin 1868); R. Netz, "On Aristotelian Paragraphs", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 47 (2001), pp. 211-232 (I owe this reference to Ch. Rowe).

12) Netz, pp. 219-224; cf. also Natali (1999), pp. IX-X.

13) Ps. Dem., *De eloc.*, 29.

II

A study of the rhetorical and methodological aspects of the *NE* is inevitably provisional and its results are bound to be revised when, or if, a new edition of the text is published. However I think that a provisional analysis of some interest can be attempted.

The experienced reader of Aristotle will be surprised by some of the distinctive characteristics of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. First, the style of Books I-IV and VIII-X is very different from the usual style of Aristotle's treatises and from the style of the Books V-VII, the so-called Common Books. The style of the Common Books is elliptical, awkward and very concise, similar to the one Aristotle uses in the *Metaphysics* and in the *Physics*, whilst the other books are relatively fluent, clear and well-organised. The reader has the impression of looking at a rather polished work, intended to be read by, or to, a public accustomed to an elegant style of speech.

Secondly, the division of the arguments does not match the division into books: an argument begins in one book and ends in another, or ends before the end of the book to which it belongs. Here is a simple schema that illustrates this peculiarity of the books of the *NE* (excluding the Common Books):

Book I: What Happiness Is. Virtue in General (beginning)
Book II: Virtue in General (continuation and end)
Book III: Voluntary and Involuntary Actions. The Moral Virtues in Particular (beginning)
Book IV: The Moral Virtues in Particular (continuation and end)
....
Book VIII: Friendship (beginning)
Book IX: Friendship (continuation and end)
Book X: Pleasure. Complete Happiness. Transition to *praxis* and to the *Politics.*

This situation has a parallel in Plato's *Republic*, where in some cases the division of the books does not match the structure of the arguments they contain. For instance, in Books IV-VII of the *Republic* we have a continuous discussion. In the course of this discussion the division into books has no connection with the content, as in the case of Book VI and VII. We find the same phenomenon in the case of Book VIII and IX in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggesting that at least some part of the *NE* too was con-

ceived as a continuous whole, with an elegant and polished style in order to appeal to the public.[14] Further, the fact that Aristotle returns at the end of the treatise to the theme of the first book, happiness, is inspired by the structure of the *Republic*.[15]

As early as the nineteeenth century, A. Grant gave a correct characterisation of the general structure of those books. He wrote:

> Reading straight on… we arrive at the end of Book IV, without having our suspicion aroused, or our attention arrested, by any symptoms of interpolation. All might very fairly be considered to have been written consecutively by the same hand.[16]

The line of argument, from the Human Good to happiness, from happiness to virtue, and from a general discussion of virtue to the discussion of particular virtues is straightforward. Aristotle first gives a general definition of his topic and afterwards spells out this definition in a detailed way. We will discuss this point later.

Aristotle's aim is not only to show the nature of the supreme human good; as he frequently says, he also wants to give his readers the opportunity of becoming better men (1095a6; 1103b26-29; 1179a35-b4). Often Aristotle gives the reader explicit practical advice how to put his theories into practice, both in their private lives and as legislators or as political leaders.[17] He wants readers to achieve not only an intellectual understanding of his

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14) Many hypotheses have been put forward about what type of reader is addressed in *NE*. Some scholars, e.g. Burnet and Bodeüs, think that Aristotle wants to address future legislators and politicians. Stewart, Gauthier and others think he is addressing Athenians (male adult) citizens in general. Others think of Athenian nobility, whose attitudes still reflected traditional aristocratic values. The most recent books on this subject are: R. Bodeüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics* (New York 1993) (French original ed., Paris 1982) and T.W. Smith, *Revaluing Ethics. Aristotle's Dialectical Pedagogy* (New York 2001).

15) F. Dirlmeier, *Aristoteles. Nikomachische Ethik*, trans. and comm. (Berlin 1956), p. 397, with a fair assessment of the similarities and differences. The attempt by F. Sparshott, "Aristotle's Ethics and Plato's Republic: A Structural Comparison" *Dialogue* (Canada), 21, 1982, pp. 483-499 to show that the entire plan of the *NE* derives from the *Republic* of Plato is too extreme, I think.

16) A. Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London 1874, 3rd ed.), vol. I, p. 44.

17) This point is central in Gadamer's interpretation of Aristotle's Ethics (cf. "Üeber die Möglickeit einer philosophischen Ethik" (1961), now in *Kleine Schriften*, Bd. 1 (Tübingen 1967), pp. 179-191), and it is well emphasised by S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York/Oxford 1999), ch. 1 and 2.

argument, but also an emotional adhesion to his doctrines. He wants to give his arguments *pistis*, and make them convincing. This explains some features of the text, which are principally evident in the first book of the *NE*. These features are the presence of a preamble, clues about how the argument will be developed, a tendency to introduce new arguments in an inconspicuous way and the articulation of general definitions through more specific analyses. Let us examine these points one by one.

The *NE* has a *preamble*, as Aristotle himself says at its end: "Let this stand as our preamble: about audience, about how the present inquiry is to be received and about what we are proposing" (1095a12-13). In this passage he indicates, in reverse order, the main arguments of the first three chapters[18] of the Book I: the topic of the investigation (1094a1-b10),[19] the level of accuracy one can expect from a moral inquiry (1094b11-27) and those to whom his work is addressed (1094b28-1095a11). Elsewhere Aristotle explains the rhetorical function of his preambles, criticising Plato's habit of not stating the real theme of his lectures clearly. The testimony is given by Aristoxenus, in his *Elementa Harmonices* II 1:

> It will be better, perhaps, to review in anticipation the kind of our treatise… in order not to have a false idea of our subject. Such was the condition, as Aristotle often used to relate, of most of the audience that attended Plato's lectures On the Good. They came, as he used to say, in the conviction that they would get from this lecture some or other things that the world calls good: riches, or health, or strength or in general some extraordinary gift of fortune… To what was all this trouble due? They had no prior knowledge, but, as the vulgar sophists, were attracted by the title of the lecture… It was for these very reasons, as he told us, that *Aristotle himself used to give to those who were going to listen to him* (τοῖς μέλλουσιν ἀκροᾶσθαι παρ' αὐτοῦ) *a preamble indicating the subject and the method of his treatise* (περὶ τίνων τ' ἐστὶν ἡ πραγματεία καὶ τίς).[20]

Often, in the first and second Book of *NE*, Aristotle alerts the public to the main shifts of his argument and *describes the development of the argument*.

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18) I follow the chapter division provided in the editions of Bekker and Susemihl. Bywater's edition offers a different division. In any case, the division into chapters dates back to the Middle Ages or to the Renaissance, and need not be taken too seriously.

19) I will return to this point later.

20) Part of this text is the Test. 1 (Ross) of Aristotle's *De Bono;* but Ross has cut out the more interesting section.

He seems to guide the audience very carefully, taking it by the hand, as it were, through the snares of his demonstration:

> "Let us then resume the argument" (1095a13);
> "But let us return to the point from which we digressed" (1095b14);
> "Let us go back to the good we are looking for, what might it be?" (1097b14-15);
> "Thus as the argument turns in its course, it has arrived at the same point; but we must try to render it even more clear" (1097a24-25).

Aristotle obviously intends to help his audience to follow his reasoning, and clearly he lacks confidence in the ability of the average Athenian to follow a complex argument, as he himself says in the *Rhetoric:* "Such hearers are unable to take a general view of many stages, or to follow a lengthy chain of argument" (1357a10-12). Aristoxenus himself, in the passage we quoted before, says: "A foreknowledge of the road we must travel will enable us to recognise each stage as we reach it, and so lighten the toil of the journey".

It is worth noting the fact that the first scholar to identify the fragments of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* in Iamblichus' work of the same name based his arguments on this very feature of Aristotle's style. He said: "The thought and style of the fragment remind one at every turn of the writer of the *Ethics*".[21] The remark is important, because it can be used in support of the opposite hypothesis. If the *NE* has such a clear resemblance to the *Protrepticus*, this is because in *NE* itself there is a strong protreptic tendency. This means Aristotle wished to exhort his public to accept his idea of supreme happiness, the *bios theoretikos.* The rhetorical aspects of the *NE* derive from a strong intention to convince, that is embedded in the work.

A similar point can be made about the third interesting characteristic of those books of *NE*. Aristotle has the tendency to *introduce new themes and topics in the discussion in an inconspicuous way*, during the discussion of other topics, and to come back to them afterwards. Aristotle seems to try not to alarm his audience by introducing too many new ideas too abruptly, but rather aims to to lead them slowly and carefully from one point to another. Here are some examples:

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21) I. Bywater, "On a lost dialogue of Aristotle", *Journal of Philology* 2 (1869), pp. 55-69, citation from p. 67.

- the idea that the real human action must rely on good reasoning (*kata logon*, 1098a7) first appears in chapter I 7, during the discussion of the distinctive function of man; but it is analysed much later, first in Book II (1103b33 ff.) and then in Book VI;
- the idea of the 'right mean' appears at 1104 a26, during the discussion of how to acquire the moral virtues, but it is fully explained later, in chapter II 5;
- the idea that the virtuous action must be based on choice appears first during the discussion of a sophistical objection (how is it possible to take right actions without being right?, 1105a17-33), but is fully discussed only in Book III;
- the idea that a moral act must be voluntary is suggested first at 1101b31, but is discussed fully only in Book III.

Some nineteenth century commentators, such as Grant and Ramsauer, maintain that Aristotle proceeds in this way in order to convince his public of his theories: *usu convinceremur, prudentem Aristoteles in docendo progressus est.*[22] In a similar way, when Aristotle discusses a problem and gives us his solution, he often uses the solution itself to introduce a new topic. In this way, he can simultaneously solve a difficulty and make his analysis progress towards the end he wants to reach.[23]

Finally, the *tendency to articulate his definition* of virtue in order to illustrate better its nature, has a practical, and not only a scientific, purpose, as Aristotle himself says:

> We must not however say that in general (= that virtue is a right mean), but must show that it applies to the particular virtues. In the discourses about action, general accounts are empty,[24] but those covering the particulars possess a higher degree of truth, because conduct deals with particular facts. And our theories are bound to accord with the particular facts (1107a29-32).[25]

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22) G. Ramsauer, *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea* (Leipzig 1879), pp. 95-99. He also says that Aristotle sometimes proceeds *percaute ac modestius*, very carefully and in a moderate way, and sometimes introduces his concept *ex abrupto;* but this second case is much more rare. Rowe, p. 14, notes this characteristic but does not recognise its rhetorical purpose.

23) On this point cf. above all Grant, I p. 395.

24) I read *kenôteroi*, with Susemihl-Apelt, instead of *koinoteroi*, as Bywater does. On this passage see Susemihl, review of Bywater, column 77.

25) Ramsauer, p. 112, and Broadie (in Ch. Rowe and S. Broadie, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* [Oxford 2002]) are right when they say that here Aristotle does not pass from the

III

If we leave the Common Books aside and pass to examine the last three books, we find some similar characteristics, although in a lower key.

Books VIII-IX contain a long discussion on friendship, similar to those we found in Book VII of *EE*. The length of his discussion is a very peculiar aspect of Aristotle's ethical treatises. Aristotle spends seventeen pages of the Bekker edition of his works discussing the question of friendship, whereas he devotes a much smaller space to the discussion of issues we might think are of more interest in an ethical treatise. The discussion of happiness takes ten Bekker pages, if we count both the discussion in Book I and in Book X. The analysis of voluntary and involuntary action is condensed to less than six Bekker pages and the discussion of weakness of will, on which contemporary philosophers have written so much, is analysed in less than five Bekker pages.

In Books VIII-IX we do not find the rhetorical features typical of the first four books. There is no indication of the steps of the argument, no tendency to introduce new concepts in a subtle way, and no indication of the practical end of the treatise. But it is evident that these books have a practical end as well as a theoretical one. Following a procedure used in Book II (chapters 8-9), Aristotle discusses in Book IX a series of *aporiai* of a very practical nature, for instance, if we must love ourselves most or our friend, if the happy man needs friends, and how many, if it is better to have friends in good fortune or in bad fortune etc.[26]

The structure of these books is similar to that of Books I and II. We have the presentation of the problem, a series of *aporiai*, Aristotle's solution, and then a series of chapters in which Aristotle discusses some related problems and *aporiai*, using his main solution as a starting point. It is a difficult question to establish whether Books VIII-IX were originally a separate treatise, and the evidence is contradictory. I tend to agree with Stewart when he says that these pages were at some time a separate treatise, but

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universal to the singular case, but from a genus to its species; anyway the indication of what applies in the case of the species can be useful in the case of an individual action, as T. Irwin, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis 1985), p. 199, rightly remarks.

26) On the comparison between *EE* VII and *NE* VIII-IX, see now C. Buffon, "Le discours sur l'amitié: différences d'exposition entre les deux Ethiques" to be published in a collective volume on Aristotle's concept of friendship, edited by P. Destrée.

were later modified to be added to the *NE* by Aristotle himself or a pupil.[27]

The connection between this discussion and what comes before is loose, as Ramsauer remarked.[28] Further, the hypotheses advanced by some commentators are vague or unconvincing. Burnet thinks that the discussion of friendship follows the discussion of wisdom because the *phronimos* is capable of having a deeper kind of friendship than other people; Dirlmeier thinks that friendship is discussed here because it is a necessary element of human happiness, which is false.[29] The main connection between those books and Books I-IV is the reference to the definition of virtue we find in the first chapter of Book VIII: "Friendship is a form of virtue or goes along with virtue" (1155a1-2). As such, friendship is a good necessary to man, and also a *kalon* thing, a part of happiness: "Not only is it necessary, it is also a fine thing" (1155a28-29). Here there is a reference to the definition of virtue that gives this chapter a similar status as other introductory chapters of the *NE*, as VI 1 on wisdom, VII 12 and X 1 on pleasure.[30] All these themes seem to represent a clarification of aspects of the idea of virtue, which is a central element in the defintion of happiness. I shall return to this point in the next paragraph.

I cannot discuss the first part of Book X, on pleasure, which presents many complicated problems concerning its relationship with the parallel discussion we find at the end of Book VII. I want merely to add a note on the second part of Book X, 6-9, on complete happiness, which appears to have been conceived as the conclusion of the entire work. There are clear references here to Book I, and Aristotle, after having moved for a while among different moral topics, wants to return, at the end of the book, to the problem with which he started. This procedure resembles an enormously large Ring Composition,[31] a feature of style typical of archaic trea-

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27) J.A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford 1892), vol. II, p. 262. For a more thorough analysis of this problem see my article: "Le logos *Peri philias.* Remarques sur la nature et les dessins des livres VIII-IX de l'Ethique à Nicomaque", to be published in the volume quoted at note 26.

28) Ramsauer, p. 503.

29) J. Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London 1900), pp. 344-345; Dirlmeier, p. 509.

30) On this point, cf. M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics books VIII and IX*, trans. and comm. (Oxford 1998), pp. 45-46.

31) On Ring Composition, cf. Netz, p. 214, and J.J. Keaney, *The Composition of Aristotle's Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1992), pp. 72-89.

tises which can be found also in the *Republic* of Plato and in some other Aristotelian works. Here, in *NE* X, Aristotle makes many references to what he said before,[32] and the entire discussion in chapter X 8 refers back to the discussions in chapters I 9 and 12: lines 1178a24-42, on external goods, refer back to lines 1098a31-1099a30; lines 1178a34-b7 to lines 1098b31-1099a30, and lines 1178b7-23 to lines 1101b25-27.

Aristotle wants to conclude his treatise by showing his public the best possible way to live. Such knowledge is necessary from a practical point of view, even if not all people can live in this way, and even if the promotion of contemplative life is not considered the universal criterion of moral choice. In ancient moral texts it was usual to describe the best possible model of life. Aristotle does not want his treatise to be considered lacking in his respect.

IV

The rhetorical aspects described above, however, are only the surface of the *Nicomachean Ethics.* At a deeper level the first books of *NE* seem to be organised on the model of investigating definitions described in the second Book of the *Posterior Analytics*, although, of course, with some adaptation due to the subject matter.

The impersonal tone of Aristotle's ethical discourse is typical of *NE*. The archaic method of teaching ethics consisted in the master openly expressing his personal experience in his works. This is to be found in gnomic poetry, such as Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and rhetorical speeches, such as Isocrates' exhortatory speeches to his fellow Athenian citizens or to the kings and tyrants of Cyprus.[33] Even some Socratic works, such as Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and Plato's *Apology*, present a strongly subjective point of view.[34] In Aristotle, by contrast, we find an objective and impersonal discourse, which reminds us of a scientific treatise.

This is not how the modern reader understands the *NE*. Usually people see the *NE* as the product of the dialectical method. Burnet said that the

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32) τίθεμεν, 1176a32; εἴπομεν, a 33; ὁμολογούμενον… τοῖς πρότερον, 1177a18-19; see also line 1177b25: λαβοῦσα μῆκος βίου τέλειον, which refers to line 1098a18: ἐν βίῳ τελείῳ.

33) See for instance *To Nicocles* 2 and *Antidosis* 2.

34) Cf. Xenoph. *mem.* I 1, 1; IV 8, 11. Plato, *Apol.* 22c-24d; *Phaedo*, 96a 6 ff.

work is: "a manuscript of a course of lectures intended for the lecturer's use, and also doubtless for consultation by members of the school".[35] Burnet was the first to say that Aristotle adopted "the method of dialectic" to find the definitions of the Good for Man and Virtue (p. XXXIX). Many people after him described the procedure of the *NE* as dialectical throughout. For instance Berti, in a book on the different methods employed by Aristotle, says that Aristotle's practical philosophy has a "intento tipologico" or a "carattere tipologico" and a "carattere fondamentalmente dialettico". The practical principles of the ethics apply only 'for the most part', as those of the physical science do, and complete *akribeia* is not possible in practical matters. Aristotle did not despair of the rational foundation of ethical principles, but these are reached, according to Berti, via a "procedimento diaporetico", that is, by the examination of *endoxa* and the refutation of contradictory theses. The method of ethics consists in the analysis of the *aporiai* in order to find a solution which eliminates the difficulties and leaves untouched the *endoxa.*

Berti's position is a version of a pattern of interpretation which is very widespread in contemporary scholarship (Hennis, Bien, Kuhn, Höffe, Pöggeler, Irwin).[36] There are, to be sure, many passages in the *NE* that use dialectical procedures and the examination of *endoxa.* But these procedures are not the whole story and, above all, they do not explain the order of the arguments in the Books I-IV.

Some scholars think that *NE* is a fairly disordered work, and much less ordered than *EE*.[37] On the contrary, I think that the disorder of the *NE* should not be exaggerated. When considered with the Aristotelian theory of definition in mind, the order of the arguments becomes clear enough. The problem of the method used by Aristotle to establish the definitions of the practical principles in the *NE*, and the problem of the order of the argu-

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35) Burnet, p. XVII.

36) E. Berti, *Le ragioni di Aristotele* (Rome/Bari 1989), pp. 113-139. Indeed, I have defended earlier the same position, cf. C. Natali, "Etica", in E. Berti (ed.), *Guida ad Aristotele*, (Rome/Bari 1997), pp. 241-282: cf. p. 250: "Il metodo della filosofia pratica non è che il consueto metodo dialettico di Aristotele". See also T. Irwin, *Aristotle's first principles*, Oxford 1988, ch. 16. He says: "[In *NE*] the dialectical character of Aristotle's method is even clearer than in the works on natural philosophy and metaphysics" (p. 347).

37) Cf. e.g. Walzer, *Magna Moralia*, pp. 74-76; J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's ethics* (Oxford 1988), pp. 6-8.

ments in the treatise admit of one and the same solution. To find it, we must take inspiration from the work of some recent scholars who have studied the biological treatises in the light of the theory of *Posterior Analytics* II, but without the empirical presuppositions of some of them.[38]

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of how Aristotle arrived at his ethical principles, it is important to observe how he defends them. He does so by enacting in front of the public the stages of a search, a *zetêsis*, organised according to the model of the search for principles described in *A. Po.* II 1-2 and 8-10. Aristotle is obviously not doing the search when writing *NE*; rather, he sets out the results of his search by repeating it in a stylized and systematic way in front of his public.

I cannot attempt here a complete analysis of the logical structure of the *NE*, nor give a résumé of the content of *A. Po.* II. I shall content myself with reminding the reader of some of the main points set out in *A. Po.* II about how to find the definitions. After that, I shall give a brief indication how these procedures are applied in the *NE*. A fuller discussion will be provided in future.

In *A. Po.* II 1 Aristotle distinguishes between four scientific questions: *hoti, dioti, ei esti, ti esti* "the fact, why it is, if something is, what it is" (89b23-25),[39] but immediately proceeds to reduce the question *dioti* to the question *ti esti* "in every case it is evident that 'what it is' and 'why it is' amount to the same" (90a14-15). Next, he warns his audience that there is a priority rule to be respected in the search, and that some questions must be answered before tackling the others. In particular the answer to the question about *ei esti* cannot follow the answer to the question about *ti esti:* sometimes they can be reached at the same time, but more often we need to know *ei esti* before knowing *ti esti*:

> Just as we seek the reason why, when we already grasp the fact – sometimes indeed these two things become plain at the same time, but anyway it is not possible to know the reason before the fact – in the same way we plainly cannot grasp what it is to be something without grasping that it exists; for we cannot know what something is when we do not know whether it exists (93a16-20).

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[38] See, e.g., A. Gotthelf and J.G. Lennox, *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology* (Cambridge 1987), the essays by Lennox (pp. 90-119) and Bolton (pp. 120-166), and D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (Oxford 2000), ch. 12.

[39] I mostly follow Barnes's translation with minor modifications (J. Barnes, *Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* [Oxford 1975]).

But in the search for the definition, which gives also the cause of the thing, there is sometimes an intermediate level to attain before we reach the definition of what the thing is. When the existence and the essence of the object are not immediately evident, it is possible for us to arrive to know that the thing exists, by knowing "something" of it as well:

> But as to whether it exists… sometimes [we arrive at knowing it] by grasping something of the object itself, e.g. of thunder, that it is a sort of noise in the clouds; of an eclipse, that it is a sort of privation of light; of man, that he is a sort of animal… when we grasp something of the object it is easier [to know its nature]. Thus in so far as we grasp that it exists, to that extent we also have some grasp on what it is (93a21-29).

When we are at this intermediate stage, we are in a good position to arrive to know its nature and why the object has the characteristics we have already found. For instance, when we know that thunder is a noise in the clouds we are in a good position to define what the essence of thunder is (93b4-5 and 15), and explain why it is a noise in the clouds,

Besides, in *A. Po.* II 10, Aristotle also distinguishes a "nominal definition" from a real definition. The first one gives only the meaning of a term – or of a nominal expression, like 'grammar school' – and not the essence of the object. The second one gives the essence of the thing: "It is clear that one type of definition will be an account of what its name, or some other name-like formula means… Another kind of definition is an account which shows why something exists" (93b29-31 and 38-39). Some scholars think that the nominal definition is useful only in answering to the question *ei esti*, if the object exists. However this is only a modern interpretation and Aristotle does not say so explicitly. We will see in a moment that in *NE* the nominal definition is used differently.

Let us examine the first four books of *NE*. In Book I, Aristotle starts from a question of the type: 'if something is' (*ei esti*). He asks himself if the Supreme Human Good (= SHG) exists (1094a1-3), and in some way manages to demonstrate it in the following lines (1094a3-b 10). What the argument for *ei esti* and if it is convincing, has been the object of a long debate from the middle of twentieth century (Geach, Anscombe, Williams, Kenny, Kirwan, Hardie, Robinson, Wedin, Seel, Broadie, etc.). This demonstration forms part of the preamble, as we already saw.

From 1095a15-16 onwards he passes to inquiring *ti estin*, what the SHG is: *ti estin… to pantôn akrotaton tôn praktôn agathôn.* As a first step he gives us a nominal definition:

> (ND) both the many and the cultivated call it (= the SHG) *eudaimonia* and they suppose *eudaimonia* to mean "living well and doing well" (1095a16-20).[40]

(ND) gives us some hits about what the SHG is: it is a way of living, something continuous and not only a momentary feeling. But (ND) cannot amount to a description of the nature of happiness. More research is needed.

The nominal definition is followed by an examination of the *endoxa*, the reputable opinions of the many and of a philosopher, Plato. This third step of the research ends with negative results (1095a22-1097a 13).[41]

At line 1097a14 we have a new start. Aristotle begins again the inquiry into the nature of the '*ti esti*'. He repeats, more or less, what he has said in the first chapter of the book, as a reminder before the new enquiry and to imply that no great progress has been achieved.

In the fourth step, 1097a14-b 20, he indicates the qualities of *eudaimonia:* it is something complete and self-sufficient. This phase is analogous to the intermediate level of the search that *A. Po.* describes as to 'arrive at grasping something of the thing'.[42]

In the fifth step, Aristotle arrives at the real definition of *eudaimonia*, which explains also why it has the qualities described before (1097b22-1098a20):

> (D.1) the Human Good turns out to be an activity of (the rational part of the) soul in accord with *arête*. (1098a16).

Since *energeia* is a kind of *praxis* which has its end in itself (cf. *Metaph.* 1048b18-36), and the SHG is a kind of *energeia*, it is perfect and self-sufficient. (D.1) gives the reason for the qualities of SHG stating its nature.

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40) After that passage Aristotle uses indifferently the terms 'happiness', 'the best', 'the final end', cf. S. Broadie, *Ethics*… p. 29.

41) Cf. Rowe (1971), p. 27. In the biological treatises as well, sometimes the analyses of the *endoxa* are unable to give appreciable results, nonetheless they are useful, because we can learn also from the mistakes of our predecessors, cf. *Metaph.* 993b11-14. An example of a procedure similar to the one we find here is in *Gen. an.* I 17-18, on which see Bolton, pp. 155-157.

42) Magirus says that this is a *delineatio* of the SHG from the point of view of its qualities, to which the proper definition will follow (cf. R. Walker [ed.], *Iohannis Magiri Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea commentationes* [Oxford 1842, ed. orig. Frankfurt/M. 1622], p. 32).

After that, Aristotle continues by confirming his definition by showing how it agrees with the main common opinions about the Human Good, and how it is able to solve some traditional puzzles about happiness (1098a21-1102a5).

But the definition (D.1) has a defect: one of its terms, *'aretê,'* when applied to *psuchê*, seems to be homonymous and *asaphos*, because the soul has parts.[43] The virtues of the two parts of the soul seem not to be the species of a common genus, the virtue of the soul in general, because they do not share any common element in their definition except the fact of being a *hexis*, as we will see. And vices are also *hexeis.* For this reason it becomes necessary for Aristotle to distinguish the two kinds of virtues of the soul, ethical and intellectual (1103a3), and to give a definition of each one. In this way, he says, "we will perhaps get a better view of happiness too" (1102a6-7), that is, we arrive at a better definition of happiness. The first task, that of finding the definition of moral virtue, is carried out in *NE* II. In this Book we arrive at the following definition:

> (D.2) [Ethical] Virtue is a disposition to make choices, consisting in a mean relative to us, defined by reference to reason and in the way in which the wise person would determine it (1106b35-1107a2).

This definition has very few elements in common with the two definitions of the intellectual virtues.[44] It should be noted that in Common Book VI we do not find a general definition of intellectual virtue, but only the definitions of the two particular intellectual virtues, *phronêsis* and *sophia.* The reason for that is that the point of view in Book VI is different from that of Books I-IV.

In any case finding the definition of moral virtue is not yet enough. Moral virtue is again divided into many parts, which are also called 'particular virtues' (*merê tês aretês, kat'hekasta, hekastê*) such as courage, temperance, generosity and so on. They are 'particular' in the sense of being parts of ethical virtue in general and not because they are individual. Aristotle feels the need to confirm his definition by showing how (D.2) it is valid for

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43) Cf. *Top.* VI, 2, 139b19-23. The concept of 'part' here is difficult: cf. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *in Metaph.* 424,29 ff.

44) The definition of *phronêsis* is "a disposition accompanied by a true reason and concerned with action about human good" (1140b20-21, reading *alêthous* at line 21); the definition of *sophia* is "a combination of understanding and scientific knowledge" (1141a19-20).

each one of them. This task is accomplished in II 7, in a schematic way, and, more fully, in III 8-IV. This examination is also useful in articulating the general notion of a virtuous character:[45]

> We shall get to know better the subject of character, having gone through those states one by one, and we shall be more convinced that the virtues are right means once our survey has shown this to hold in all cases (1127a15-18).[46]

At the end of Book IV *NE* is interrupted and the missing part is replaced by the Common Books.

Although I cannot examine those Books now, I hope to have indicated in brief how Aristotle uses in the *NE* the *A. Po.* model to search for the principles of an *epistêmê*. By guiding the public through the process of discovering the truth, represented in a neat and stylized way from the beginning of Book I to the end of treatise, he argues in favour of his vision of ethics. He combines in his main treatise on ethics a protreptic intention and a practical interest with an order of the exposition inspired by the prescriptions of the *Posterior Analytics*. This mode of presentation enables Aristotle to organise his ideas in a logical way and to make them credible for the most cultivated members of the public. *NE* is not an early or a confused work,[47] but rather a skilful construction, the fruit of a mature intelligence.[48]

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45) Burnet, p. 100.

46) The same idea recurs at 1108a14-15: "we must talk also about these states, in order to have a better idea of the fact that in every virtue the right mean is an object for praise".

47) As some XIXth century scholars maintained, as e.g. Kapp, *Das Verhältnis*…, pp. 27-28; cf. also Rowe, *The Eudemian*…, pp. 27-31. An attempt to reverse the traditional order of importance of the two ethical treatises is made in Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics.*

48) Part of this paper was discussed at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, and part at the Universities of Paris 1 and Oxford. I would like to thank S. Manning, T. Scaltsas, A. Marmodoro, A. Jaulin, P.M. Morel, D. Charles and many others for the kind invitations and for many useful comments.